



Thomas F. Barraga
Suffolk County Legislator
187 Sunrise Highway, Suite C
West Islip, New York 11795
(P) 631-854-4100
(F) 631-854-4103

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CONTACT: Susan Malone
E-Mail: Susan.malone@suffolkcountyny.gov



BARRAGA: NEWS FROM THE 11TH DISTRICT

A TREATISE ON TRUST

By Legislator Thomas F. Barraga

Trust is a basic value upon which an orderly society is based. Without this ultimate and steadfast foundation, we have nothing to assure us a life protected from chaos and anarchy.

The values we were taught as children never die. In them we find direction, a road to travel as we journey life's highways. Respect, honesty, being a person of one's word....a person to be trusted....are virtues which serve to better not only ourselves, but everyone whose lives we touch.

I read a story about a man who worked for a small company that manufactured garden tools and snow shovels in his hometown back in the 1930s. He was responsible for the upkeep of the grounds as well as the walkways leading to the plant. One day, after a snowstorm, as he shoveled a path to the building's entrance, his foreman saw him. "Great job, Bill. You have this sidewalk as clean as a whistle!" Bill responded that it was easy with such a magnificent shovel. The only shovel he could afford was an inexpensive, crude tool which no matter how hard he labored, never cleared a clean path.

Bill's foreman was a kind gentleman. He told Bill that for as long as he worked for the company, he could take home one of their shovels and use it whenever he needed. Bill never dreaded another snowstorm.

One morning a notice was posted stating the plant would be closing its doors and moving to a new location. Bill was disheartened that he would be losing his job. When he saw the large vans taking away the remaining inventory, he rushed home. As the last of the trucks pulled away from the factory, Bill came running down the roadway and hailed the driver to stop. Lovingly, he placed the shovel, loaned to him so many years ago, onto the flat bed. Since he no longer would be working for the company....the magnificent tool must be returned.

There was no one around to keep Bill honest. In the flurry of moving, one small shovel wouldn't be missed. Who would know? No one other than Bill. And that is what is the heart of trust. Never lost amidst the universal principles, trust is the standard bearer of moral code which we set for ourselves; it is a deeply personal tenet which motivates our actions regardless of who is watching.

All walks of life suffer when trust is lacking. Nowhere is its absence felt more profoundly nor by so many people than in the political arena. At each level of government, power is entrusted into the hands of men and women whose decency is tested daily. Many are victorious in the face of such challenge. Some are not.

As we read of the accounts of those accused of betraying public trust, our anger and frustration grow. We become like Diogenes, our lanterns held resolutely before us, as we search the night for one honest person.

In the administration of a government pledged to uphold for the good of the people, trust must be rooted deeply in the hearts and minds of those elected to serve. Integrity must be the companion of those sworn to support the Constitution. As public officials affirm to faithfully discharge their duties, the demands of this supreme and sacred trust imply a scrupulous fidelity to such behavior which benefits and serves the people.

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Representatives are not the sole protectors and defenders of the Constitution. This same Constitution which mandates the oath of office belongs to the people! Grover Cleveland believed, as I do, that the Government you have committed to one of your fellow citizens is yours! The ballot which accomplishes the will of free men and the laws which ensue are your votes and statutes! In this spirit we understand that every citizen who values our precious liberties is obligated to keep a vigilant watch and close scrutiny of its public servants. The power has always been with the people to determine a fair and reasonable estimate of the fidelity and usefulness of those they place in office. In this way, the people's will is engraved upon the foundation of our democracy and it is preserved!

I have always believed that people want an elected official who is aware of and represents them and their needs; who is visible and available to listen and, if possible, to help. But first and foremost, people want someone who regards his or her position as a public trust and who fully recognizes that included in the job description are the words "integrity" and "honesty."

The conscience of the people impresses mightily upon the fabric of the nation. By our example, our children will be led; by our courage to bear witness to the truth, our country will endure. As we reflect on the story of Bill and the well-placed trust of his foreman, may we all be reminded that we are obligated to be true to ourselves.

With truth prevailing, trust is given new life.

Previously submitted April 2011.